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ABSTRACT

This article presents an account of how one teacher and one student work through James Joyce's short story, "Eveline," illustrating an important reconceptualization of literacy--the teacher struggles to make public those aspects of reading which are often only assumed or left covert, namely, entering the world of the text, groping for meaning, questioning, re-reading. Although he teaches students whose reading ability is low, he refuses to allow the unevenness of their "basic" skills to disbar them from higher order thinking skills. In essence, he recognizes that if he uses vocabulary or reading comprehension to decide who can read literature, he runs the risk of perpetuating educational inequalities. Finally, even though his students did not grow up on "the" myths or fairy tales, he teaches them with a kind of expectancy. He knows that he can tell them much about Dublin, Catholicism, and Joyce, but he also anticipates that their quite different lives and perceptions will enlarge the sense even he makes of "Eveline." His conception of teaching English literature, and literacy, is not one of indoctrination--it comes closer to conversation. (MM)

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Becoming Literate: One Reader Reading

Dennie Palmer Wolf

Just over a year ago, the College Board's Educational Equality Project asked Dennie Wolf to take a close look at the teaching of literature in American high schools. Her observations are now available in a remarkable book entitled Reading Reconsidered: Literacy and Literature in High School. The following is a brief selection from that book in which the author gives an account of a teacher and a student newly arrived in this country meeting over one of the classic short stories of the Western literary tradition. Both the book and this excerpt, we believe, are essential reading for all those interested in the complex issues of the "multicultural classroom."

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Just like the definition of "femininity" or "poverty," that of "literacy" is a mercurial thing, conditioned by time and place. Colonists were literate enough if they could sign their name, or even an X, on loans and deeds. When immigrants arrived in large numbers in the 1800s, educators urged schools to deliver "recitation literacy" to the foreign children who filled the schoolrooms. That literacy was the ability to hold a book and reel off memorized portions of basic American texts, such as the opening paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, a part of the Gettysburg address, or some Bryant or Longfellow. With the coming of World War I, and the prospect of large numbers of men handling new equipment in foreign countries, army testers redefined reading. Suddenly, to the dismay of men used to reading familiar passages, passing the army reading test meant being able to make sense, on the spot, of never-before-seen text. Currently, that kind of "extraction literacy," so revolutionary in 1914, looks meager. Finding out who, what, when, where, or even how simply does not yield the inferences, questions, or ideas we now think of as defining full or "higher" literacy.

But, in all of this, we are not inventing new forms of literacy; educators have always offered writing rather than X's or questioning rather than recitation to the gifted and the privileged. What is unprecedented is the notion that this kind of literacy should be common. The idea of a classroom

where young women, poor and minority students, and learning disabled students *all* read (not recite) and write about (not copy) Shakespeare or Steinbeck is a radical and hopeful departure from the long-running conception of literacy as serviceable skills for the many and generative, reflective reading and writing for the few.

What follows is an account of one teacher, one student, and one story. In the course of working together on reading James Joyce's "Eveline," this student and teacher live out what is involved in a reconceptualization of literacy in the most concrete way: The teacher struggles to make public those aspects of reading that we too often assume or leave covert—entering the world of the text, groping for meaning, questioning, re-reading. To do this he risks showing how he reads, what puzzles and what pleases him. Although he teaches students whose reading ability is checkered, he refuses to use the unevenness of their "basic" skills to disbar them from "higher order thinking skills." In essence, he recognizes that if he uses vocabulary or reading comprehension to decide who can read literature, he runs the risk of perpetuating, rather than challenging, educational inequalities. Finally, even though his students did not grow up on "the" myths or fairy tales, he teaches them with a kind of expectancy. He knows he can tell them much about Dublin, Catholicism, and Joyce, but he also anticipates that their quite different lives and perceptions will enlarge the sense even he makes of "Eveline." His conception of teaching English literature is not one of indoctrination (or vaccination); it comes closer to conversation.

A Teacher and a Student

It is Wednesday and warm. Petrolli faces a classroom of 20 students, some who pay attention, some who doodle, some who did the reading, some who haven't opened the book. Right now those books are open to a story that is hard going. It is demanding, ambiguous in places, set in a world geographically and historically distant from the one these students know. The story is Joyce's "Eveline," a story of a

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19-year-old girl who vacillates between staying on in the familiar round of Dublin and family, and the uncertain future of leaving on the evening boat for Buenos Aires with her fiancé.

Clarissa is 17. Only a few years ago, she came to the United States from "the islands." At a large urban high school, her past English classes have been a steady march of short excerpts followed by worksheets. At home she reads the newspaper, magazines, letters, but mostly she reads the Bible and a prayer book that she carries with her. This year, in an after-school program, she signed up for Mr. Petrolli, even though he's "hard." He makes them read whole books—and write. For several weeks now, Clarissa has been reading Joyce's collection of short stories, *Dubliners*.

Clarissa is reading "Eveline" for homework and she talks out loud about what she notices. She comes to the paragraph where Eveline stands looking at the room she is about to leave:

Home! She looked round the room, reviewing all its familiar objects which she had dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where on earth all the dust came from. Perhaps she would never see again those familiar objects from which she had never dreamed of being divided. And yet during all those years she had never found out the name of the priest whose yellowing photograph hung on the wall above the broken harmonium beside the coloured print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque. He had been a school friend of her father. Whenever he showed the photograph to a visitor her father used to pass it with a casual word: "He is in Melbourne now."

As she finishes the paragraph, Clarissa begins to talk, showing how her months in Petrolli's class have taken hold:

She used to be dusting and now she's running her thoughts over the things she knows, like even the things her father used to say. It is the right word he [Joyce] uses here, *divided*, because if he says, "from which she never



A reader's experience and environment—no matter what that is—can unlock and enrich literature for her, and for the attentive teacher as well.

wanted to go away," it would be very different. When you just go away, you come back. Divided—it is like an orange; you cut it [she makes a sharp, slicing gesture], and it will never stick together again. To be divided from the things you know, the things of your family, is to be lonely, maybe always.

She does more than take information away from the story; she also fills in what Henry James called "the gaps" in a story, using her experience and knowledge of the world. To begin, she draws inferences; it is she, not Joyce, who says that the room is really furnished with Eveline's memories. It is she who senses that a word like *divided* has been chosen among many possibilities and must signify a very particular meaning. She recruits her own experience and imagination to enlarge the literal text—drawing on her own life as an immigrant to argue that the finality of leaving is like the slicing of an orange—abrupt, almost violent, and final.

She senses something that draws her attention—this idea of what division costs. It gives a point or a direction to the way she reads the rest of the story; she wants to know whether Eveline will see the value of home and family before she forfeits it for some distant elsewhere. As she reads, her own copy of the story becomes a map of the play of that interest. She underlines the questions she finds in the story (*She had consented to go away, to leave her home. Was that wise?*). As she reads, she tracks Eveline's moments of saying no or yes or maybe to the idea of leaving home. To begin, she picks out "She would not cry many tears at leaving the Stores," writing in the margin "yes, for her family."

Further on, she underlines the passage in which Eveline's father is described as "usually fairly bad of a Saturday night," and "to see that the two young children who had been left to her charge went to school regularly." She draws a line down the margin of the paragraph where Eveline's father clowns in her mother's bonnet at the Hill of Howth. She does the same where Eveline's mother dies, wringing from her daughter the "promise to keep the home together as long as she could." This last sentence she underlines and places an exclamation point in the margin.

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Recruiting Her Own Experience

But as actively as Clarissa reads after months with Mr. Petrolli, she is still learning. The next day in class, she tries to describe Eveline:

Clarissa: She's nineteen and she's thinking she is going to leave her room. It must be hard for a rich girl...

Petrolli: How come she's rich?

Clarissa hunts down the sentence about Eveline's "holding her black leather purse tightly in her hand as she elbowed her way through the crowds." Other students chime in, mentioning Eveline's evening at the theater and the boat trip. Petrolli recognizes that they are reading the story as an extension of their own world with no sense that Eveline's Dublin was ruled by different economics or expectations. They read Joyce's turn-of-the-century story as if it were a contemporary account. At that moment, Petrolli pauses and talks about entering the particular world of a fictional work:

Wait... what else do you know about Eveline's life? What about the dusty curtains and the broken harmonium? Why were there all those squabbles over money on Saturday? She's not rich. She lives in a different time, when there were no plastic purses. Anyone who had a purse, had a leather or a cloth one.

All the Seas of the World

The class moves to the end of the story. Until those closing paragraphs Joyce registers the absolute details of Dublin: the bright brick houses with their shining roofs, the cretonne curtains, the colored print of promises. But the closing paragraphs of the story suddenly deny Clarissa access. There Joyce brings Eveline to the dock ready to leave for Buenos Aires with Frank, but he has her hesitate, writing: "All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them; he would drown her." Petrolli asks, "What's happening here?"

Clarissa ventures:

Here I think she is staring down into the water and getting very afraid. Maybe she has never been near the sea before. She is thinking that she will fall in... that Frank will pull her in and that she could drown. So she holds on. She doesn't want it to happen; she is afraid of the waves, the sea, so she screams to him not to pull her.

Petrolli is quiet, letting other students talk.

Student 1: I don't get this part here at the end. What's he mean, "All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart"?

Student 2: She was keeping him back, so Frank missed the boat. He had to jump in the water. And he was calling to her to jump, too. To show that she loved him.

Student 3: No, they're just standing at the gate to the boat. She's just looking down in the water and it's making her seasick and she's mad at him for bringing her

there. That's why she doesn't go with him in the end.

Student 2: So why's he saying things like tumbled and drowned, if she's not in the water?

Student 4: No, she only feels like she's drowning, like he's dragging her along where she doesn't want to be.

Petrolli comes back to Clarissa and asks her again what she would say about those closing paragraphs. She turns to the last page of the story and begins:

Clarissa: Okay, she is at the boat, down in the harbor.

And I think she had never been on a boat before, so she is full of surprise... It is too much for her, the water, too. She feels like she will fall in and drown right there. And Frank is pulling on her, maybe not so gently. He is wanting to be there, on the boat. She thinks he will drown her.

Petrolli: This word, *drown*, what does it mean here?

Clarissa: To die in the water.

Petrolli: So she is afraid she will fall in or sink on the ship?

Clarissa: [long pause] Well, I was thinking this: "the seas of the world" could mean more than just that. The whole paragraph, even using the same words, could mean something different. Like in the Bible... deep waters, troubled water, that kind of drowning, drowning in sorrows. Or "all the seas of the world," maybe it is like all the people of the world—they "tumbled about her heart." She knows she is leaving the little area where she has been living, even though it's poor and dusty. She is going out into the seas of the world, all those strange people she is going to be with in the bigger area. They will surround her and she won't know them, not like home with her family. That's a way he would drown her, too. [Pause]

You know how white people aren't really white like this? [She reaches out toward the white wall of the classroom.] The same word, two meanings. So drown like to die in the water and drown like you are stifling and you can see yourself dying, all alone, surrounded by other people, but away from your family.

From Detail to Metaphor

In this way Clarissa tunes her reading midstream, learning to go from registered detail to metaphoric reading. Petrolli listens—as does the rest of the class—as she works her way toward this understanding.

However, it is not just the figurative language of "Eveline" that is difficult for Clarissa. The story both evokes and denies familiar story patterns. We read about Frank with "his hair tumbled forward over a face of bronze," his theater tickets, his teasing, and we sense a romance, maybe of the Prince Charming and happily-ever-after kind. It is a pattern into which we begin to arrange what more we read: the quarrel with Eveline's father and the escape to Buenos Aires. But it is a pattern that Joyce undercuts, freezing Eveline's will as she reaches the pier.

This is difficult, however, for Clarissa to see. A few

weeks later, when they are finishing *Dubliners*, Petrolli and the students are talking about the abrupt sadness of many of the stories. Clarissa argues that "maybe the stories aren't really sad." She comes back to "Eveline," talking about what might happen after the story ends:

You know, Frank's going to go away. He's going to be there in Buenos Aires for a long time. And then one day, one of the ships will be going back there to where she is. And he will get on it and walk right up her old street to that brown house. And she's going to be there waiting. She's still sad she didn't get on the boat with him. At first she might be turning her face away, but then she's going to give in and they'll be married.

Petrolli is about to say something when another student interrupts:

Leora: No way, she is depressing. She's nothing. She can't even make up her mind to get on that boat. He's not coming back for her.

Petrolli: How do you know?

Leora: He's always talking about how Frank lands on his feet. He's up, she's down.

Petrolli: We've been all the way through *Dubliners* by now. Does anybody get out?

Together they begin to talk, moving back and forth between "Araby," "Eveline," and "The Dead." Talking about the class later, Petrolli says he likes giving them "memory"—"just because they read it, they shouldn't forget it."

Beyond Reconceptualizing Literacy

Clarissa is important in all this. She makes the point that this kind of active reading is open to, and important for, all readers—not just those who already recognize Dublin or figures of speech. But Clarissa's teacher is just as important. It is he who insists that students like Clarissa deserve literature—even though they may be puzzled by the Irish geography, Catholicism, and mythology that thread through a story like "Eveline." "How else are they going to learn to read literature, if you don't give them the real stuff?" Petrolli asks. As a matter of habit, he talks out loud about the search and reflection characteristic of deep literacy. When Clarissa mentioned what she thought about the word *divided*, he didn't just say "Mmm, mmm." He joined the conversation:

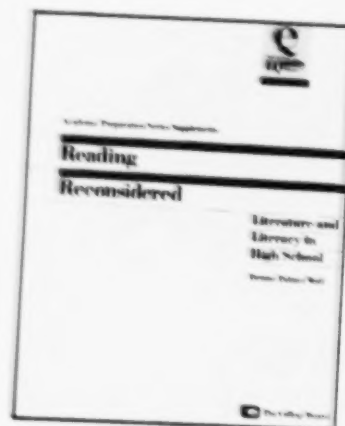
Clarissa stopped on the word *divided*. Did you ever stop to think what you can get from a word or two? Take *broken* as the description of the harmonium. It makes me think of having a tinny player piano from Zayre's. You buy it, everyone plays it for two weeks, then it breaks and no one really knows enough or cares enough to fix it... and

it sits there invisible in the corner of the family room, a reminder of everybody's hopes they'd learn to play overnight, be a star. I read *broken* and say, "What would be different if it were just a harmonium along with the photograph and the list of promises?"

When Petrolli finds that Clarissa assumes Eveline is rich because she owns a leather purse, he checks her and pushes her to think about the aspects of her life that can and can't be extrapolated to the world of a fictional story. The way Clarissa marks up her text, tracking an idea, may come from the day Petrolli brought in his old college copy of *Dubliners*, joking about the maze of checks, circles, and underlinings from his repeated readings. The way she breaks through to understanding the figurative climax at the close of the story might not have occurred if he didn't understand the point and the power of re-reading.

What Mr. Petrolli does is perhaps unprecedented. Not only has he re-thought literacy, he teaches it—everyday.

Reading Reconsidered



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